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THE NEW MISSIONARIES/Part 2

Another cross to bear CIA involvement

For more than 150 years, U.S. missionaries — Bible in hand — have traveled the world to spread God's word. But today's missionary ventures forth with a different mandate in mind, and often in the face of extreme danger. This is the second in a series.

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The Summer Institute of Linguistics might seem to be an unlikely target of suspicions of Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) involvement.

A branch of the Wycliffe Bible Translators, the institute works in remote areas of the world, its missionary-linguists living for 15 to 20 years with remote villages of people who have no written language.

The linguists transcribe the unwritten languages into written form and then translate the New Testament into the language, converting the people to Christianity along the way.

But the fact that linguists spend years in remote areas arouses suspicion in some. So does their dedication to seemingly insignificant peoples — some of the villages the institute works with have as few as 100 people.

The institute also has contracts with the governments of the 36 countries it works in; it accepts some government grants from the U.S. and other countries for special projects, and in countries where suspicion of the U.S. government is strong, the institute has not escaped suspicion itself.

In Colombia, Chester A. Bitterman 3d, a 28-year-old native of Lancaster, Lancaster County, was preparing to dedicate more than 15 years of his life as a missionary-linguist to a village of only 110 people.

He was one of 200 missionary-linguists and support workers in the country. There are 1,500 missionary-linguists with the institute around the world — another 3,500 affiliated staff members do support work such as maintaining supply bases or radio services.

But on Jan. 19, Bitterman was taken hostage by a group of left-wing guerrillas, and six weeks later was murdered. The group charged that the institute was a CIA front. The institute denied involvement with any government intelligence agency — in fact, it forbids it, it said. Bitterman's father said that his son, a fundamentalist Christian, felt he was "led by God" into missionary work.

The institute has been a target for more than a decade of rumors that it has spied, set up missile bases and even mined precious minerals or run drug operations in Latin American countries. The rumors have never been confirmed.

Bitterman's murder comes in the midst of widespread controversy in missionary circles over the role of U.S. missionaries in Third World countries and U.S. government funding of some missionary development projects and relief work.

It also has led to more specific actions by Protestant denominations. Among them is the United Methodist Church, whose Board of Global Ministries' World Division approved a policy this month that "no ransom will be authorized on the basis that such response places in jeopardy all personnel and programs of the church."

Espionage allegations against missionaries in Third World countries are not uncommon and do not center on U.S. missionaries alone. In

Iran, three British Anglican missionaries accused of spying were imprisoned for more than six months until the charges were dropped in February.

Past CIA use of missionaries was uncovered in 1975 during a 15-month investigation by the U.S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence Activities. The final committee report said it had information that 21 missionaries were used by the agency in the 1950s and 1960s.

It was a different era. Among missionaries who helped the CIA was famed Catholic missionary doctor

Dooley, sainthood, Dooley, who died of cancer in 1961 at 34, served as an unpaid informer to the CIA in the 1950s when he was a doctor in Laos and Vietnam. He reportedly passed information about villagers' sentiments and troop movements near the Laos hospital where he treated the starving and wounded.

"He (Dooley) was a doctor and humanitarian. He thought this would help those people and help prevent communism taking over those countries," said the Rev. Maynard Kegler, a priest working for Dooley's sainthood.

Church groups now solidly oppose use of missionaries by the CIA, citing separation of church and state, fear that the practice would taint and endanger all missionaries and concern that government policy is not always identical to church stands.

"They go in as missionaries of the church, not as missionaries of the government," said Dr. Lois Miller, associate general secretary for the United Board of Global Ministries of the United Methodist Church, which — like many other denominations in recent years — specifically prohibits any CIA involvement among its missionaries.

In 1976 a public policy statement was issued by then-CIA Director George Bush that the agency had terminated its "paid or contractual" relationships with American clergymen and missionaries and would not renew them.

CIA internal guidelines in effect since 1977 state that "American church groups will not be funded or used as funding cut-outs (fronts) for CIA purposes." They also state that the CIA shall establish "no secret, paid or unpaid, contractual relationship with any American clergymen or missionary . . . who is sent out by a mission or church organization to preach, teach, heal or (proselytize)."